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ABSTRACT

When students write in response to literature, they make reading a creative act. Recording their personal reaction to a poem or an excerpt from a larger work, students become aware of the complex web of past experiences, associations and ideas triggering their responses; they learn to interact more fully, more consciously, with the text. Besides writing paragraphs on immediate responses, perceived links with stories in movies, television or other readings, and similar personal experiences, students can also create literary journals. Directed by a series of assignments, students can incorporate a variety of writing experiences--personal narrative, short and long essays, research, public and private reflections--and answers to questions on theme, meaning, characterization, and tone and mood, into a record of their growing understanding of how literature influences reader reaction. (Questions and students responses to specific poems are included). (MM)

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The Writing Response to Literature

by Gloria Blatt and Lois Matz Rosen

CS 207716

"I don't like poetry, but I liked the ones we read this term because I could get really involved in them and I understood them."

"I learned a lot about literature and reading and writing this term."

"I understood more about the literature we read this term than I ever did before."

These are a few of the comments which we have received from students in courses we teach combining writing and literature. In these courses, readings are used as the basis for discussion and papers are assigned about the ideas in the literature. Despite this focus on writing, and despite all the writing that goes on in the classes, course evaluations often center heavily on how much students enjoyed the selections and how much they learned about reading literature. We've come to believe it's the writing that causes this reaction to the course: somewhere, somehow, in the process of doing all the writing that goes on in these classes, the students become more responsive readers. This may be due to the nature of literary response.

Louise Resenblatt says that a primary goal for teaching literature is to enhance students' interactions with the text. We believe that an especially effective way to do this is to ask students to write about their reactions to the selections. In that way we help them toward a more personal involvement with the text. The theoretical constructs of Louise Rosenblatt and James Britton support this belief and explain to some extent what happens in these classes.

Rosenblatt has described literature as "a performing art" not a passive act. There must be personal involvement/engagement with literature for it to be meaningful to the reader: to be "an experience in the life of the reader." The reader acts on a text and interacts with it, bringing self and past experiences into the reading process. This is a highly personal interaction. The reader's unique interests, past experiences in life and with literature, as well as present life situations, all affect reading. Reading, then, is as much a creative act for the reader as it was for the writer.

We believe that writing is a very powerful way to accomplish this. James Britton appears to support us when he talks about the shaping and forming functions of written language:

> There's a whole world to be interpreted and writing is a major way to interpret it....Every time a child succeeds in writing about something that has happened to him or something he has been thinking, two things are likely to have happened. First, he has improved his chances of doing so the next time he tries. In other words, the piece of writing has given him practice, and secondly, he has interpreted, shaped, coped with some bit of experience. (Explorations in Children's Writing, p.20.)

Therefore, when you ask students to write in response to literature, you are forcing them to give shape and form to their general, vague, amorphous responses to the text--to being these thoughts to conscious awareness. You are also asking them to examine that literature much more closely than they might normally, which helps them come to a better understanding of it and become more involved in it. This interaction of reading and writing strengthens both students' writing and their ability to relate to a piece of literature.

We have demonstrated through workshops in several schools that this approach to the teaching of literature is appropriate for almost every age

group. Children from the intermediate elementary grades all the way through college profit from methods which combine reading and writing, focusing students' writing on enhancing personal involvement with the text.

The success of this approach can be seen in the writing of a group of seventh graders who were read an excerpt from the book Nilda by Nicholasa Mohr and then asked to write a personal response. Nilda is the story of a Puerto Rican girl living in New York City during World War II. In the section read to the boys and girls, Nilda visits her dying mother in the hospital for the last time and her mother says:

> "Do you have that feeling, honey? That you have something all yours...you must...like when I see you drawing sometimes, I know you have something all yours. Keep it...hold on, guard it. Never give it to nobody... not to your lover, not to your kids...it don't belong to them...and they have no right...no right to take it. We are all born alone...and we die all alone."

After reading this excerpt to the students, we asked them "to write exactly what you thought and felt as you were listening." Here are some of the responses, unedited first drafts written in class directly after hearing the excerpt:

> You could tell that their was alot of love going through the family. If I was Nilda's mother I would want to die being on welfare and being poor and all that. but it is probaby hard to except dieing. Nilda's mother is alot like my grandmother she had cancer too, and died about a year ago. I think my grandmother had the same veiws on life as Nilda's mother even though she wasn't poor. It was probaby hard for Nilda to except what her mother was saying. I think her mom was saying hold on to life while you have it, and never let go untill you are ready. It is very painful to have someone you love die. I went to visit my grandma while she was in the hospital. The day after I left she died. (Girl)

> It is hard to imagine what it would be like to be a woman and have children and be expected to give everything you have to your children. If you give everything to your children you will have nothing that is really all yours. Yet if you keep everything for yourself you may not be happy. (Boy)

> Nilda's mother, I feel, is very lost in life and probably used in the way she talks about. Though I think she is very good to warn Nilda. I feel almost like Nilda when its read, the confused thoughts, the love she has for her mom and how hard it is to except what her mom is saying. Life has been hard for her now that her mom is dying she has no sholder to lean on. Her mom, also, probably reasaring Nilda. That every thing her mom has worked here for and never realy owned. Is now going to be hers. herself alone. No one can take it away from her. (Girl)

It can be seen from these comments that the young writers responded personally to aspects of the reading that were meaningful to them. For example, in the first paper the girl said, "If I was Nilda's mother I would want to die being on welfare and being poor and all that." She then related the reading to her own grandmother's death. In the comments she moves from personal involvement to analysis of the text as Rosenblatt, Bleich, and others have suggested. The second excerpt, written by a boy, reveals his identification with the female characters in the story and suggests that the story has led him to feel some empathy for their situation. The response of the young girl writing the third excerpt reveals considerable depth of feeling and personal involvement. Note the phrase "I feel almost like Nilda when its read" before she goes on to express the emotions evoked by the excerpt and to expand upon the mother's remarks.

The students in this class were interested in hearing each other's responses and so the papers were collected and we read most aloud. Student involvement is usually high on these occasions and leads into a very active discussion because they've already had a chance to form their ideas which are now available to them in their own writing. When the writers read their own responses, they often feel a need to elaborate even further. The teacher can enhance this process by commenting on the students' comments

or asking "What in the literature made you feel that way?" This leads the class discussion back into the text and shows the student the relationship between his or her response and the literature. Often during these discussions other students will volunteer to read what they have written when it elaborates on, or takes issue with, another student's response.

This is only one of many ways in which teachers can use writing to lead students toward a more personal interaction with the text, many of them more structured. One can, for instance, ask a series of questions for students to deal with after reading a piece:

1. Without planning, jot down your immediate responses to the text--the feeling it evoked in you--any associations it brought up--any ideas it made you think of.

2. Have you seen or read a similar story--in the movies, on TV, in other reading?

3. Has anything similar ever happened to you?

4. Are any of the characters similar to anyone you know?

This works particularly well with those students who are unfamiliar with this approach to literature and writing and may need more guidance in finding what to say, especially in homework assignments. A set of open-ended and response-oriented questions such as these provides a more personal alternative to answering study guide questions at the end of a story. Brought into class the next day, students' writing provides a focus for class discussion.

These techniques work equally well with poetry as well as prose. The following series of questions are effective when presented to students along with a poem:

1. What is the poem about? What do you see in the poem? (Perceptions)

2. How does it make you feel? (Feelings)

3. What does it make you think about? Anything that happened to you? Any feelings you or someone else you know ever had? (Associations)

Here is an example of what one student did with Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz":

My Papa's Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy.
But I hung on like death.
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt.
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Student's response:

> The father who was drunk out of his mind beat this boy. I think that this must happen in some houses that a parent gets drunk. Yet in the future when this young boy grows up he will not respect his father and mother and not be proud of them. Mr. Roethke put a clear message to me saying "Parents if you want any respect from your kids you can't beat your child. And you can't drink and still think that he/she will still cling to your shirt."

The poem is ambiguous in several ways: the reader can sense both fear and pleasure in the young child, and certain words suggest a beating rather than a dance. The young reader quoted above responded to the negative images in the poem and concluded with his judgments of the

father's behavior.

Still another way to approach writing as a response to literature is to ask students to keep a structured journal as the whole class or a group within it reads a novel. On the day the book is started, the teacher presents the class with a series of journal questions and directions: "We will be keeping a type of journal while we read this book. Please do all of the following journal assignments and bring your journal to class with you each day. Label each entry with the date and the number of the entry. We may share the starred entries in class. Those without a star will only be read by the teacher." Here is a sample set of journal entries based on The Burg-O-Rama Man, a new novel by Stephen Tchudi describing an ad-man from a large MacDonald burger-like company coming to a small town to develop some television ads featuring students and teachers in the high school. Characterization and contemporary values are explored as the ad-man makes his choices. The book is written for students of approximately junior high or middle school age.

* Entry I The Burg-o-rama man is looking for typical students in a typical town. Describe what you think he is looking for. Do you consider yourself and your friends typical students? Is your school typical? Your town? Why do you think so?

* Entry II Pretend that your school has been chosen for the Burg-o-rama ads. The Burg-o-rama company introduces the whole series to the public with an opening commercial. Design this commercial based on your school, your town. (See pp. 22-24 for the format to use.)

* Entry III When Jeff was losing the game, the crowd turned against him and began to criticize. Kelly was upset by this and thought that maybe she would write an editorial about this for her newspaper. She was going to call it "Bad Losers." Write the editorial for her.

* Entry IV Mr. Robert Walton, the biology teacher, spent a good deal of time trying to make his students aware that commercialism was often amoral and that the Burg-o-rama hamburger was junk food. Yet he accepted Burg-o-rama's invitation to be in one of their commercials. What do you think of his decision?

* Entry V There is a description of Kelly's first impression of Costello's market in Chapter Four. It is full of fascinating Italian food--the smells, the sights, and the sounds of the market. Describe a food store that you have been in, using the same sensory detail. It could be a specialty food shop, a bakery, or even the local supermarket.

* Entry VI When the Burg-o-rama man decides to use Mary Costello in a commercial, he says to Mary, "I wonder if you and I could have a discussion." Write the conversation between Mary and the Burg-o-rama man in which he tells her she has been chosen.

Entry VII After the incident with Donnie, Tom, and George, Kelly says, "I was ashamed of my friends." Sometimes we are disappointed by the people around us--parents, friends, teachers, relatives, can disappoint us. Describe an incident in which someone disappointed you.

Entry VIII Donnie was considered "different" because he was a male dancer. Have you ever known a person who was "different" from everyone else in some way? Describe this person and tell how he or she was different. How did people respond to this person? How did you respond to this person?

* Entry IX Kelly turns down the opportunity to be in one of the commercials. Write a paragraph in which you explain all the reasons Kelly gives for her decision. What would you have done if you were Kelly? In a second paragraph, explain what you believe you would have done in the same circumstances and tell why.

In creating structured journals the following principles should be kept in mind: 1) Variety of writing experiences--personal narratives, personal responses, structured forms such as an editorial or a letter, short pieces as well as long, essays, even expository writing based on research beyond the text. 2) Some for sharing with others; some just for private use. 3) Questions should deal with themes, meaning, characterization, tone or mood, so that students are led to a deeper understanding of the reading. These structured journals can be prepared for any level student, elementary through college, and any form of literature from children's novels through the classics. Perhaps the best thing that can ever be said about response journals was written by a student in a class which used written responses to literature all term:

> "I think the journal provided me with the most insight into my own understanding of [the reading we did this term]. It helped me to sort out ideas and feelings and actually get them down on paper."

Any of these approaches to writing and literature will provide readers with opportunities to express their feelings about a book, to relate the literary experience to real life, and to step back and view the book in a more objective manner. Writing may take many forms, but in all, the writer "will interpret, shape and cope with some bit of experience."

Resources

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